opinion

ILLAWARRA MERCURY

EDITORIAL

Projects are essential for city's survival

THE single biggest catalyst for the rejuvenation of Wollongong is a revitalised city centre.

Part of that will happen through a planned makeover of the mall.

More importantly though is the plan by the GPT property group to develop a $250 million multi-storey complex in Keira St linked to Wollongong Central by an overhead pedestrian walk.

The Wollongong project includes a supermarket, multi-screen cinema complex, 760-seat food court and parking for 800 cars.

Once completed it will add backbone, variety and vibe to Wollongong which already is struggling under the weight of the parking meter fiasco.

Unfortunately, the Keira St project is now on the backburner, a victim of the world financial meltdown.

Even more worrying for Wollongong is news that GPT has pulled out of a $600 million project in Newcastle.
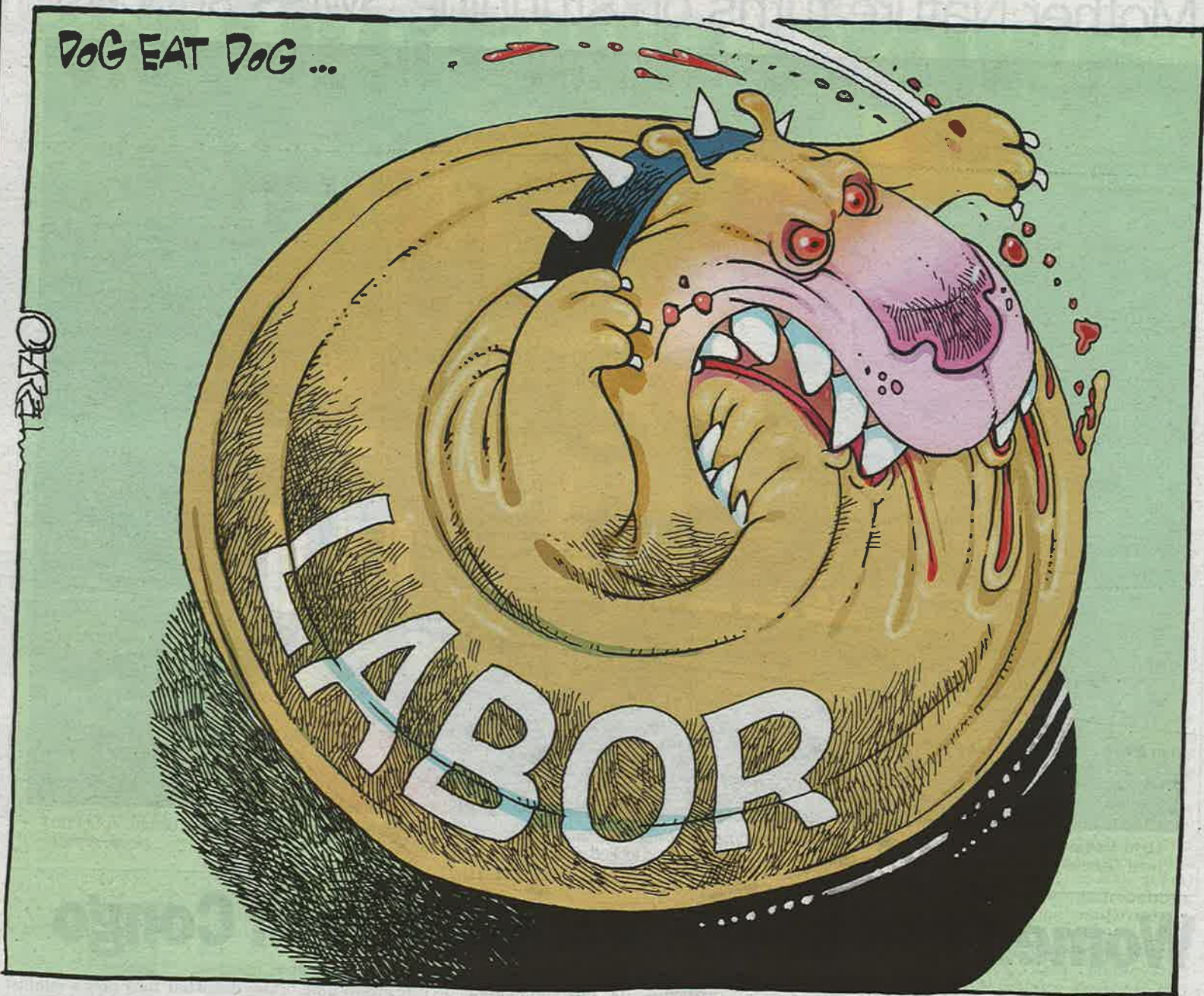
If the Wollongong project collapses it will have huge ramifications for the city.

This city's business leaders, state members and council should be doing everything to make sure that doesn't happen.

Without it Wollongong faces an uphill battle to halt the flow of shoppers to Stockland Shellharbour and out-of-town retail outlets.

BORN TODAY

August 25
Petria Thomas, Australian swimmer (1975 -) Thomas made her debut for the Australian team in 1993 and three years later competed in her first Olympic Games at Atlanta, winning silver in the 200m butterfly. She retired from professional swimming following the 2004 Athens Games.

HISTORY

1793 - First church built in Sydney.
1940 - The British Air Force drops first bombs on Berlin in an overnight raid in WWII.
1994 - Australian swimmer Kieren Perkins (pictured) smashes 800m and 1500m world records in same race to win gold in Commonwealth Games 1500m freestyle.

Vinnie's view

DOG EAT DOG ...

LABOR

Stop social network pitfalls

> It is possible this new generation of technologies is creating a new breed of mental disorders.

Katina Michael

ASK a group of teenagers how they spend their spare time and most will mention Facebook, YouTube, World of Warcraft or Second Life - "virtual" social networks that bring millions of people together online. The benefits of social networks have been touted but what about the pitfalls?

Some teens will share everything about themselves to hundreds of online friends, most of whom they have never met. Twitter style prompts like where you are, what you are doing, and who you are doing it with reveal a lot about behaviours, inner thoughts, even vulnerabilities.

Some teens upload hundreds of photographs and videos that can be shared publicly, without comprehending the repercussions for themselves or others involved.

Given many teens carry smart phones, interfacing with applications like Facebook is very easy.

"Instant" ability to point, click and upload means trigger happy teens may be revealing way too much. It also means someone who takes footage of you can use it as they see fit without your permission. A single drunken episode or an event showing a teenager in compromising behaviour, freely distributed within a classroom of mobile phones, can drive a teen to despair, and in some extreme cases even to suicide.

There is no room for error in this kind of world where everything is public. Personal space to make our mistakes in private, learn from these trials and errors, and move on is increasingly diminishing.

Teens that do not fit the established community can face humiliating consequences and become targets of cyberbullying, financial scams or pranks. Being "unfriended" online can cause feelings of dejection, loneliness, and even depression. When a teen realises the friends they once entrusted with everything meaningful to them have the power to misuse this private information, it may not take long for anxiety behaviours to set in.

It is possible that this new generation of technologies is creating a new breed of mental disorders. While there are now established clinics where teenagers detox from heavy internet usage - some relearning bodily functions like eating, sleeping and going to the toilet - there are many who deny these kinds of side-effects exist.

But ask a teenager how often they update their status entry in Facebook, or how often they text a "friend", and you will probably be astounded. Some even provide false status updates to look like they are busy, others develop obsessive behaviours like leaving endless notes on people's online wallpaper or constantly looking up a friend's physical location.

Such online references like "you are tagged" or "you are being followed" or "you are currently sharing your location" mean some might become increasingly paranoid, finding it difficult to distinguish between the physical and virtual worlds they live in.

The study of the negative effects of social networking on teenagers is still in its infancy. Resources are needed to fund mental health projects which investigate the impact of internet based social networks on young people, particularly those who are insecure, prone to depression, suffer with obsessive compulsive disorder or some form of personality disorder.

The negative fallout from social networks upon the community also has to be measured and effective programs to especially help educate school children on how to exploit these applications, and not be exploited by them, must be made available.

Dr Katina Michael is associate professor in Information Technology at the University of Wollongong and collaborator on the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Panel at the Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute.

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